DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 021 887 UD 003 099

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REDUCING THE SCHOOL DROPOUT RATE: A REPORT ON THE HOLDING POWER PROJECT.

Pub Date 1 Jun 63
Note- 17p.
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.76
Descriptors- DATA, DEMONSTRATION PROGRAMS, DROPOUT CHARACTERISTICS, DROPOUT IDENTIFICATION, *DROPOUT PREVENTION, DROPOUT RATE, *DROPOUTS, GUIDANCE PROGRAMS, SCHOOL HOLDING POWER, SECONDARY SCHOOLS, STATE PROGRAMS, STUDENT ATTITUDES, STUDENT MOBILITY
Identifiers- Holding Power Project, New York State

This report describes a project in New York State which used extended and improved guidance services to lower the school dropout rate. The project was conducted by the State Bureau of Guidance between 1954 and 1960 in cooperation with 89 secondary schools. Specifically discussed are project findings concerning school holding power rates. Factors affecting school holding power, dropout mobility, reasons for students dropping out of school, school retention efforts, and the characteristics of students who voluntarily withdraw from school. Also discussed are the general reactions of retained pupils to their educational and guidance programs, and the ways potential dropouts might be identified. (LB)

REDUCING THE SCHOOL DROPOUT RATE –

A REPORT ON THE HOLDING POWER PROJECT

First printing July 1963
Second printing May 1964
Third printing June 1965

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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The University of the State of New York
The State Education Department
Bureau of Guidance
Albany, 1965

UD 003 099
ED021887

FOREWORD

"Nation Needs More Skilled Manpower," "Youth Unemployment Grows," "School Dropouts Unprepared for Work"—such headlines are numerous. They emphasize the great concern in the nation for fuller utilization of human potentialities and the greater implementation of the concept of universal secondary school education for all our youth.

The phrase, "stay in school," has been used over and over as an admonition and encouragement for youth to be persistent in their school attendance. A companion phrase, "keep them in school," might well be coined and used to highlight the school's responsibility for a deeper commitment to providing appropriate education for all children and youth.

Over the years, there have been many studies of school dropouts. A unique feature of the study reported in this bulletin is its longitudinal aspect. In this project, school and pupil characteristics and outcomes in relation to holding power were studied for six years.

This report gives a brief summary of more extensive information gathered and compiled by the Bureau of Guidance. Much of this information has been presented to project schools and other group meetings of school personnel throughout the State. Materials mentioned in the report have been distributed widely and are still available through the Bureau of Guidance. The 1958 "Stay-in-School" letter of Associate Commissioner Walter Crewson, which is still very timely, can also be obtained through the Bureau of Guidance.

When do dropouts leave school? What are the characteristics of dropouts? How can a school improve its holding power? These are some of the questions on which this report focuses attention. The project was carried out by 89 school districts in co-operation with the Bureau of Guidance, during the years when Bruce E. Shear was Chief. The concept of the 6-year holding power study was Mr. Shear's. Dr. Harold L. Munson, now of The University of Rochester, was project co-ordinator for the first 5 years, followed by James W. Moore. The latter has been responsible for preparation of this report, under the supervision of Dr. Irving Ratchick, present Chief.

June 1, 1963

Everett Kleeck

Assistant Commissioner for
Pupil Personnel Services and
Adult Education

Reducing the School Dropout Rate

(A Report on the Holding Power Project)

I. Purpose

The Holding Power Project was conducted by the Bureau of Guidance in co-operation with 89 school districts between 1954 and 1960. The specific objectives of the project were these:

1. The improvement of the holding power of the secondary units of the co-operating school districts
2. The determination of factors by which early school leaving might be predicted and prevented
3. The continuous improvement of the guidance services in the co-operating districts

II. Procedures

Holding power was defined as the ratio of the number of graduates from a single class in a secondary school, to the potential number of graduates from that class, expressed as a per cent. All pupils who were ever members of the class during its secondary school years and who did not voluntarily leave the group were considered potential graduates. Thus, pupils entering the group by transfer or retardation were considered potential graduates, and pupils transferred or retarded out of the group were not so listed. Dropouts were included as potential graduates.

The project began in 1954, when members of the class of 1960 in the co-operating schools entered grade 7 and commenced their secondary program. More than 12,000 pupils, including all those enrolled in grade 7 in the schools, were involved initially.

As with the other projects co-ordinated by the Bureau, the Holding Power Project was primarily conceived for demonstration purposes. For this reason, wide geographical distribution of co-operating districts was sought and achieved. Because the U.S. Office of Educa-

tion was pursuing a study of the school retention rates in large cities at the time the Holding Power Project was being developed, the largest cities in the State were not included in the project. The 89 participating districts were located in 54 of the 62 counties in the State. The number of project pupils in the districts ranged from less than 20 to approximately 700. Twenty per cent of the districts enrolled 50 per cent of the total project population.

The aims of the project were pursued through activities which emphasized early identification of potential dropouts and the development of effective measures to retain them in school. A reporting system was established which provided information on the progress of all members of the pupil population, especially those thought to be potential dropouts and those who did become dropouts.

Individual members of the class were carefully identified. This practice was repeated for all members entering and leaving the study group at each grade level until graduation of the class in June 1960. The disposition of each member of the group toward early school leaving was estimated annually through reference to a list of student characteristics known to be associated with "dropping out." This instrument *(Pupil Holding Power Data)* was prepared by the Bureau. Special efforts were made by the school personnel to prolong the attendance of students whose ratings included a preponderance of "vulnerable" items. Annual reports describing the status of all members of the project population were prepared for school use and copies forwarded to the Bureau. Additional data were supplied concerning those pupils who did withdraw voluntarily from school; i.e., the dropouts.

To assist schools in the systematic collection of information concerning project activities, several forms were developed by the Bureau. The *Record Check List* outlined the types of pupil information that the districts were advised to collect, maintain, and use concerning each pupil. The rating scale, *Pupil Holding Power Data,* has been described above. The *Identification and Separation Record* detailed for each pupil in the study population, the conditions under which he arrived in or departed from the group. The *Voluntary Withdrawal Data Sheet,* prepared only for dropouts, included an account of certain critical pupil characteristics. The *Annual Holding Power Summary Sheet* summarized, at the end of each year, the movements of individual members of the population during the year and listed the net registration at the end of the year. The *Annual Sum-*

mary Sheet was forwarded each year to the Bureau, together with all data pertaining to dropouts during the year.

These forms — as well as a series of bulletins prepared at the end of each project year which described effective practices noted in the schools *(Holding Power Practices Bulletin 1–6)* — may be obtained from the Bureau of Guidance, State Education Department, Albany, New York 12201, upon request. These practices were observed by Bureau supervisors during their visits to the schools to assist local staff members in implementing project objectives. Beginning in 1954–55, and continuing through the term of the project, each school was visited by a Bureau supervisor twice each year. To provide for exchange of ideas, area meetings of project district representatives were held the first 2 years of the project.

Beyond the preparation of certain uniform reports and the annual survey to discover potential dropouts, the co-operating schools did vary in their project efforts. In some instances the reduction of early school leaving was accepted as a challenge by the co-operating school staffs and truly fruitful attacks on the problem were made. In some cases, project activity gradually became limited to record keeping. The consistent intent of the Bureau was to stimulate and encourage schools in their attempts to reduce the incidence of early school leaving rather than merely to observe and describe the situation as it existed.

III. Findings

A. Holding Power Rates

1. The total pupil population
   a. The percent of potential graduates retained in school at the end of each grade level is recorded below:

Grade	% of retention (holding power)
7	99.5
8	97.7
9	94.2
10	89.4
11	84.1
12	80.5
Graduated	77.9 (data from 81 of 89 schools reported)

b. The per cent of males graduated was 73.1 and of females, 82.8.

2. School holding power rates

   a. The median per cent of potential graduates retained through the end of grade 12 in all 89 districts was 80.

   b. The median per cent of potential graduates actually graduated in the 81 districts which reported this figure was 77.

   c. In 81 districts which reported, the per cent of potential graduates actually graduated both for the class of 1954 and the class of 1960, the median rate improved from 72 per cent in 1954 to 77 per cent in 1960.

3. During the project term, a total of 2,616 pupils left the total study population as dropouts, distributed by grade level as follows:

Grade	Number of dropouts
7	55
8	211
9	519
10	679
11	657
12	495

B. Factors Affecting School Holding Power

1. **Size of the Class:** Schools in which the study population included less than 100 pupils or more than 200 pupils did not retain proportionately as many pupils as those with classes in the range between 100 and 200 pupils. This, of course, relates to the community factor, below.

2. **Community Type:** The retention rates in large cities and small rural districts were not so high as those in communities of intermediate size and location.

3. **School Retention Efforts:** Schools which improved their holding power rates the most over the term of the project exerted more efforts of all types to retain pupils than did schools which improved their rates the least. The difference between the levels of efforts was statistically significant.

4. **Educational Appreciations:** On a pupil questionnaire, seniors in high holding power schools indicated more appreciation of the values inherent in education than did seniors in low holding power schools. The difference between the degrees of appreciation was statistically significant.

C. Dropout Mobility

The careful identification of members of the project group in each school has been mentioned. This process was essential to the accurate determination of holding power per cent. However, a further advantage has been its usefulness in determining the mobility of the project group, and particularly the voluntary withdrawals from it.

Of those pupils who left the class as dropouts, approximately one third came to be in the class because they were members of it when the project started, another third entered as transfers from other school systems, and the final third joined the class when they failed to be promoted to a higher secondary grade within the school system.

Of all those pupils who joined the class because of retardation, nearly 40 per cent eventually chose to drop out of school, frequently before a year had elapsed. The negative effect of retardation was further highlighted by the fact that only 3 per cent of a sample of project pupils who remained in school through grade 12 joined this class as retardees during their secondary school years.

The act of transferring from school to school did not appear to predispose pupils to early school leaving, since the per cent of dropouts who entered the project class as transfers and the per cent of pupils who remained in school but who joined their graduating class as transfers were approximately equal.

The pupil accounting process made available information concerning the apparent destinations of voluntary withdrawals. Of those known by school officials, "employment" was the largest, at each grade level. However, the popularity of this item declined as the project progressed with "enlistment" for boys and "marriage" for girls assuming ever increasing importance. In grade 12, 31 per cent of the dropouts entered employment, 31 per cent of the dropout boys joined the armed services, and 25 per cent of the girls left to become married.

D. Reasons for Dropout

The reflections of pupils who chose to leave school and the reflec-

tions of their counselors, upon this decision, were collected for study. Ostensibly, these were recorded following an exit interview which project practice required for each voluntary withdrawal. In some cases, particularly those of summer withdrawals, an interview was impossible, but the counselors' comments were nonetheless solicited.

More than half of the situations described by counselors as affecting the decision to depart grew out of factors inherent in the reactions of pupils to their school environment. It was considered impractical to attempt to assign the precipitating role to either the pupil or the school in these situations. The per cent of such problems ascribed to males was nearly one and one-half times that for females.

Two other categories included most of the other withdrawal influences identified by school officials. Those associated with the family of the dropout accounted for one quarter, and those resident uniquely in the pupils themselves (physical, social-emotional problems), another seventh.

The specific elements most often described by counselors included the attitude of the pupil's parents, the pupil's lack of success in school, his low ability, and his indifference to the demands of the school environment. For girls alone, considerations related to marriage were frequently mentioned.

Following the exit interview, the counselors also noted the reasons advanced by pupils for their decision to leave. Most frequently cited were " dislike school," " prefer job to school," " failure in subjects," "want own income," and for females, " desire to marry."

A comparison of the rationale of interviewers and dropouts shows a surprising degree of agreement.

E. School Retention Efforts

Together with the attention cited above to the reasons for withdrawal, interviewers were asked to note briefly, for individuals who left school, the efforts expended before their departure to assist them to remain. Slightly more than one third received no special attention according to the information provided. It is, of course, possible that this statistic reflects a weakness in record keeping rather than a lack of service. The counselor assisted 42 per cent, program adjustments were reported for 23 per cent, and the parents of 20 per cent were sought out for help with the problem.

The program adjustments generally took the form of admission to courses of study closer to the needs of the pupil than the offerings

otherwise available, or exemption from some of the school's regulations.

Female dropouts were less well served than males. No efforts were reported for a greater percentage of females. Also, counselors, teachers, and other staff members were listed as making efforts to retain a greater percentage of males than females. Further, a greater percentage of males than females was granted program adjustments, and more contacts were attempted with their parents.

F. Characteristics of Voluntary Withdrawals

Beginning with voluntary withdrawals in grade 8, the second year of the project, information concerning certain of the characteristics of the departing pupils was recorded. To add meaning to our analysis of these data, similar studies were made of the characteristics of pupils who remained in school, on topics where this treatment was pertinent.

1. Month of Withdrawal: During the summer months, when school was not in session, 24 per cent of the dropouts severed their connection with the school. September and January, months of new beginnings in school, were each chosen by 11 per cent as the date of departure. *Smaller percentages were recorded for all other months* during the school year.

2. Age at Withdrawal: As the project shifted its emphasis from grade level to grade level in concert with the progress of the class of 1960, an increase in the median age of withdrawal was noted. From 16–0 for pupils leaving in grade 7, the range extended to more than 18 years for senior boys and 17½ years for senior girls.

3. Academic Accomplishments: Pupils who chose to withdraw voluntarily did not fare well academically before departure, although the performance of girls was more satisfactory than that of boys. On the last report before departure, only one in five boys was credited with " passing work " in all his subjects in contrast with one in three girls. The academic subjects of English, social studies, mathematics, and science were more troublesome to early school leavers than other areas of study, although the failure rate of those in business education approached that of the academic subjects mentioned. Of special interest is the observation that the rate of failure in English was twice as high for males as females. Most programs of departing pupils included some combination of these subjects: English, social studies, mathematics, science, business education, and art. To this

list, boys most often added industrial arts; girls, homemaking education.

4. **Grades Repeated:** To be legally eligible to leave school at the median ages reported for the early grades of the study, it is obvious that our voluntary withdrawals must have spent more than the usual interval at some of the preceding grade levels. At least one grade had been repeated by 71 per cent of male withdrawals and 50 per cent of the girls. Only 9 per cent of the project members who completed the final year in the study population had this history.

The early secondary grades were most frequently repeated by early school leavers followed by grades at the elementary school level. At the former level, 44 per cent were not promoted regularly, 36 per cent at the latter. By way of contrast, among those pupils who did not drop out but who repeated some grades, 62 per cent were "held back" during the elementary years, but only 15 per cent repeated in the early secondary grades. The percentages who were not regularly advanced through the senior high school are approximately equal for the two pupil classifications.

5. **Measured Ability:** Some explanation of the scholastic difficulties of those who withdrew is apparent in their reported measured abilities, especially for withdrawals from the junior high school grades. Their median intelligence quotient was 84. For pupils who left during the senior high school grades, the median was 96. Most striking was the regular increase in the median quotient of pupils leaving at the several grade levels through which the project group progressed. From 75 in grade 7, this figure ascended to 100 in grade 12.

In comparison with pupils who remained in the group, voluntary withdrawals typically did not score well on measures of ability, although there was some overlapping in the distributions of the scores of the two groups. Intelligence quotients of more than 100 were reported for 75 per cent of those who remained in school but for only 36 per cent of those who left from the senior high school grades. The median quotient reported for pupils who remained in school was 108.

6. **Physical Condition:** Five of every six early school leavers were considered to be in good or excellent health. Females were regarded as slightly less robust than males. However, 17 per cent of the dropouts were described as in fair or poor health, but only 6 per cent of the retained students.

7. Attendance: Before withdrawal, students who eventually became dropouts attended school less regularly than students generally. Their percentage of attendance was 3 points less than that of all pupils in the year prior to withdrawal but 8 points less in the year during which they departed.

8. Family Attributes: The family structure of both junior and senior high school dropouts was less often "usually" organized (both parents present in the home) than were those of students who remained in school. However, as with other characteristics, the greatest disparity appeared among the junior high school group. The percentages of families so described were 64 for junior high school dropouts, 71 for those who left from the senior high school grades, and 84 among pupils who did not leave school before the end of grade 12.

The attitude of the parents of pupils toward continued school attendance for their children seemed to be of crucial importance. According to school officials, only one third of the parents of pupils who withdrew were positively oriented toward this question, in contrast with 90 per cent of the parents of pupils who remained in school.

G. Characteristics Reviewed

Our data suggest that to speak of a typical dropout is inaccurate. For example, what we have called the "asymptotic trend" was discovered, which suggests that, as students leave from successively higher grade levels, they become more and more similar to pupils who remain in school, in the degree to which they manifest certain characteristics, such as age at grade levels, measured ability, rated vulnerability to early school leaving, and academic success. Neither are the attributes of male and female dropouts interchangeable. Before citing some of these general differences, it may be of interest to note that the ratio of male to female dropouts was two to one in grades 7–9, five to four in grades 10–12, and three to two for the full project term.

Although very alike in measured ability, females were much more successful in their school work than males. Males, however, received more attention from school officials. Perhaps this was due to their poor work. Although we have no specific measure of the relative aggressiveness of the two sexes, it seems reasonable to expect more from the males, which also would bring them more often to the attention of school personnel. Problems growing out of reactions

of the pupil to his school setting were more often attributed to males. In the later phases of the study, females tended to leave at a younger age than males, frequently because of impending marriages.

H. The Reactions of Retained Pupils

An attempt was made to determine if the reactions of pupils to their educational programs generally, and specifically their guidance programs, were related to the holding power of their classes. The responses to two questionnaires of pupils in schools in the top and bottom quarters of the holding power distribution were compared.

Although the results for the two groups were more similar than dissimilar, certain important differences did appear. In high holding power schools, more pupils than in low holding power schools:

1. Exhibited needs for assistance in matters revealing a desire to exploit fully their present educational opportunities, including those which related to assistance in continuing their education
2. Had plans to continue their education
3. Had plans to enter professional occupations
4. Had tentative, rather than specific, choices of the eventual occupations they planned to enter
5. Did not plan to obtain a job following graduation

Further, in high holding power schools, more parents of pupils had been in contact with the counselor than was the case in low holding power schools. Also, pupils in the lower group of schools indicated a higher availability of counseling service, which was sufficient to their needs. This last was interpreted as perhaps due to less pressure in these schools for counseling assistance.

The types of assistance by the counselor to the two groups of pupils were not as distinctly unique as the differences portrayed above. There was evidence, however, that, in the important matters of educational and occupational planning, the counselor was regarded as the prime source of help more often by the lower than the higher group. Paralleling and partially explaining this preference is the suggestion, in our data, that high holding power school pupils seemed more independent of school resources in several areas than their counterparts in low holding power schools.

Previous experiences with one of the questionnaires, which had included an analysis of the results in terms of the socioeconomic status of the pupil respondents, revealed much the same variation

in counselor regard and general independence, between high and low status pupils as we have discovered between pupils in high and low holding power schools.

I. Prediction

A major objective of the project was "the determination of factors by which dropouts might be predicted and prevented." Prediction was attempted through a technique which required the annual rating of all pupils in the population on a scale, the items of which were associated in the literature with early school leaving. This device, developed by Bureau members, was entitled *Pupil Holding Power Data.* A study of the results for pupils who voluntarily withdrew, and for those who remained in school, indicated that the scale did predict future dropouts with acceptable accuracy. The ratings revealed, however, that greater success may be expected in the detection of potential male dropouts than female. Approximately 80 per cent of the males were identified as possible early school leavers at least a year before withdrawal, and the figure was about 70 per cent for females.

Two trends, which appeared together, were discovered. The first was another manifestation of the "asymptotic trend" earlier noted. In this instance, it was displayed as a decreasing average vulnerability rating as withdrawals from successively higher grades were studied. The second was the increase of the average annual vulnerability ratings for withdrawals at specific grade levels as the year of their withdrawal approached. This was interpreted as evidence that staff members were sensitive to the pupils' growing inclinations to leave.

The items on the scale which most effectively distinguished early school leavers from their peers who did not leave were "age," "grade retardation," "learning rate," and "pupil's interest." The items which had the least predictive value were "physical size," "health," "father's occupation," and "school to school transfers." Because of the importance of occupation as a determinant of status, and the apparent relation of that factor to school holding power, an explanation was attempted of the low predictive value of the "occupation" item. It was suggested that, in future use, the structure of this item should be revised.

J. Practices and Results

Prevention factors were less specifically identified. An attempt

to relate the use of each of a number of project techniques in a sample of schools to the holding power for the project group in these schools was unsuccessful. Turning to the broader "retention efforts" listed for dropouts, and examining these efforts in the two groups of schools whose holding power had improved the most and the least over the project term, did yield statistically significant results. More efforts were expended to retain pupils by schools which displayed the greatest gains. Interestingly, it was discovered that these efforts in high gain schools had been emphasized for males. However, these findings were qualified by the suggestions that the status of communities in which the high gains were realized was higher than that of the communities in which the low gain schools were situated. In effect, successful retention efforts and favorable community dispositions seemed to be concomitant essentials to the improvement of holding power. This finding argues powerfully for the involvement of community leaders, and especially parents, in any attempt to increase the holding power of schools.

IV. Conclusions

In sum, the project has revealed that school retention rates can be improved when counselors and staff members together attack the problem, when they earnestly work to involve the parents of potential dropouts in their efforts, and when they take advantage of the predictive possibilities of the project-developed check list (*Pupil Holding Power Data*) to focus their efforts on potential dropouts.

The special role of the counselor may be to provide a communication center for the staff team attempting to assist individual students. By virtue of his position, he has greater access to students, parents, and teachers, as well as to pupil record information, than do some of his colleagues. This is not to say his contribution is any more vital than that of any other staff members, and certainly not to indicate that he alone must bear the responsibility for the reduction of early school leaving. Each member of the staff must offer his own unique assistance to individual potential dropouts. The counselor, in addition, serves as a liaison between the team members.

Specifically, school districts interested in improving their holding power rates may wish to consider the following steps: (1) Ascertain the holding power of one or more recent graduating classes and study

the reasons that pupils left school in grades 7–12. (2) Develop and keep up to date a good record of pertinent information for each pupil. (3) Identify potential dropouts systematically. (4) Be particularly alert to dropout proneness in nonpromoted students and those whose school marks take a marked turn downward. (5) Arrange and co-ordinate staff efforts to prevent early school leaving. (6) Consider for potential dropouts school program adjustments, school-work experience programs, additional counseling, summer contacts by school personnel, and extracurricular activities. (7) Closely involve the parents of potential dropouts in all retention efforts.

Schools frequently seek standards with which to compare their retention (holding power) rates. Logically, the only relevant standard is the local school's capacity to assist pupils. If a study of the characteristics of pupils who have dropped out of the local school reveals that substantial numbers could have been assisted to remain with "reasonable" efforts on the part of the local staff, then the retention rate, regardless of its magnitude, cannot be termed satisfactory. A consensus on the definition of "reasonable" must be reached by the local staff, since the problem seems to yield only to long-term commitments by the majority of those working with individual potential dropouts. Unless most staff members accept the finding that something can be done to assist such pupils, those otherwise in a minority will find it most difficult to improve effectively the local retention rate.

Our results suggest that small-rural and large-urban school districts, in which the socioeconomic level of parents may be somewhat less than in districts that fall between these extremes, may have special problems in improving their holding power rate. In terms of the high rate of dropouts and the large number of pupils served, particular and early attention should be given to increasing the holding power of schools in the larger urban centers of the State.

V. Summary

The Holding Power Project was conducted by the Bureau of Guidance between 1954 and 1960 in co-operation with 89 secondary schools in New York State. Its purpose was essentially to launch an attack on the problem of early school leaving through extended

and improved programs of guidance service. Members of the class of 1960 were designated as the study population, and project efforts were concentrated on these students from the time they entered grade 7 in 1954 until the class was graduated in 1960. A number of forms and procedures for the collection of data and the prediction of potential dropouts was developed by the Bureau.

It was determined that potential school dropouts can be systematically identified well in advance of their departure, that the attitude of parents significantly affects the decision of students to leave school early, and that only combined efforts of many types by counselors and their professional colleagues are positively related to a reduction of early school leaving. It was also found that small-rural and large-urban districts tend to retain a smaller percentage of pupils than districts of intermediate size and location.

The study suggests that more pupils will remain in school when their counselors and teachers co-operate closely in retention efforts, when the parents of potential dropouts participate actively in the attempts of school personnel to assist their children, and when potential dropouts are systematically identified for early and increased attention.

Prepared by JAMES W. MOORE

June 1963